

Relics of All Things Precious

Room Sheet

1. *Still life with glass objects*
2012
Glass, shelf
Dimensions variable
2. *Adventure Samplers*
2011 – 2012
Embroidery floss on archival digital print
Each work framed 35.5 cm x 30.5 cm
3. *A brief compendium on the poetics of collecting*
2012
Ceramic bookends, five borrowed library books, shelf
4. *Some notable figures in the personalised history of the collected world*
2012
Graphite, gouache on paper
69 cm x 49 cm unframed, 103 cm x 72 cm framed
5. *Perfect Pets*
2012
Ceramic figurines, felt, thread, ribbon, glass beads, diamantes, vintage jewellery, pom poms, millinery flowers, wire
Dimensions variable
6. *Scarabattole*
2012
Found objects and images in cabinet

Appendix A

Relics of All Things Precious: Studio Research Exhibition

Introduction

The written research component of *Relics of All Things Precious* investigated the practices of seminal artists who demonstrate a poetic engagement with the world through a collecting methodology that utilises both a rational systematic inquiry and sensible intuition in the construction of their work. To this end, these artists engage with organisational and structural frameworks that provide coherence and legibility within institutional collections, such as classification and display. Yet by utilising aspects of the *Wunderkammer* model, these artists also invite the idiosyncratic, heterogeneous, and chaotic into their work as a way of expressing the immaterial and material condition of being in the world.

These artists' collections, which not only constitutes their methodology of producing an artwork but also the work of art as an outcome, employ the artefacts of the material world (both natural and manmade) as participants in a theatre of inquiry that seek to position curious, poetic, intuitive, unresolved, and psychological phenomena as legitimate and necessary to the expression of an engagement with the world. In this light, the material world becomes a mediator between the artist's personal experience and the collective socio/historical experience.

This position has provided the basis of the studio research component of *Relics of All Things Precious*. The work presented for the exhibition conceptually and formally examines aspects of personal collections which revolve around idiosyncrasy, attributions of value and function, acts of possession, and reframing historical events within the sphere of personal experience. This work is not a direct illustration of the concepts discussed within the dissertation but rather the work is informed by the field as framed by the research.

Overall Concept and Methodology

The artworks presented in this exhibition address different vantage points in viewing how a personal collection operates. Methodologically underlying this studio research is the subtle inversion of the traditional ways of working with collections as an inquiry into the personal attribution of significance of collected elements, which investigates how collections are mediated by personal experience and history.

The works are all based upon the phrase ‘relics of all things precious’. This phrase embodies several key concepts developed within the written dissertation that are integral to interpreting the artwork within the exhibition. First is the term ‘relic’, which represents a memento or remnant. A relic not only has intrinsic and extrinsic importance both personally and collectively, it also functions symbolically as a material trace of an immaterial occurrence.

The concept of ‘all things precious’ addresses the specific condition of living in a global consumer society which is saturated by mass produced objects that are designed to fill every void in our lives. This is coupled with the post 9/11 digital information age, where every piece of information is endlessly archived, anticipating its potential importance in the future. Such an information and material overload redefines the role of the individual as a collector rather than a creator.

Therefore the artwork in the exhibition takes the form of collections, which are each constructed according to different criteria, while at the same time examining the personal collection (as an individual’s way of attributing significance through selection) as a strategy of demarcating and ordering the given world and also as a poetic way of incorporating the condition of information and material overload into the collection.

Within the artwork, the collection provides a site of paradox where ideas of value and significance as an established criterion of collection (e.g. rarity, age, provenance) seem in direct contrast to the plethora of items available to collect. As a result the distinction between mass produced and unique, kitsch and cultured, and ultimately

the dilettante and the connoisseur is blurred. The collection provides a site that inverts and conflates high and low culture.

As such, the artworks in the exhibition rely upon the objects and images collected to act as relics of contemporary life which utilise the viewer's familiarity with the items to elicit an associative response. This associative dialogue is not only played out between the viewer and the artist but also between the artist and the collected object as a methodology akin to American-English artist Susan Hiller's way of working through objects. This methodology exposes the inherent symbolic potential of objects by using them to dictate the direction of the artwork. Within this exhibition this way of working allows the immaterial (e.g. concepts, memories, histories) to exist physically, reflecting a poetic approach to the construction of work as it must be interpreted rather than presented.

The items within the works presented are accrued over time, where each work becomes a collection through the methodology of their production. Furthermore the works in this exhibition are then worked on through the artistic process, whether that is stitching, sorting, drawing, or decorating. As such the materials used to alter the collected objects and images are also collected.

This highlights the concern in this exhibition that all things are potential art materials – in essence this exemplifies French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's bricoleur who collects disparate things in the hope that one day they will be useful. However, rather than creating functional or useful items (there is no DIY function to these collections), the artworks highlight objects that are specifically removed from their use value as a strategy of exploring the relationship between the intervention of the artist upon the object and vice versa.

Artworks Exhibited

Still life with glass objects (2012) examines the relationships between objects in a collection and the aesthetic quality of materials not traditionally collected.

This work is a collection of decorative and functional domestic glass objects, all of which act as containers for other things (e.g. candle holders, perfume bottles, display globes, and hurricane lamp chimneys). Formally this work is reminiscent of the *trompe l'œil* glassware and soap bubbles found in Dutch still life paintings (which are in themselves artworks about collections). However rather than performing a *vanitas* or an allegorical function, the use of glassware within this work is driven by the nature of its role within collections and its transparent materiality.

Clear glass is traditionally used as the container of the collected object as a way to physically demarcate the space of the object as separate from the everyday world in order to protect and segregate the collected object. Furthermore the importance of the object's transparency is linked to the need to be an invisible structure. These objects collected within the artwork all represent this purpose of invisibility, designed to highlight the objects they contain. The paradox of this piece is that only the glass 'containers' were collected.

Within *Still life with glass objects* (2012), transparency performs another function. To be able to see through something constructs a new relationship with the object's surroundings by conflating the exterior and the interior into a singular space. In this way glass has a duality where it exists as an autonomous entity and yet, due to its transparency, glass objects embody the objects around them creating a set of unexpected and intimate relationships with each other because visually they become a part of each other. At the same time these objects also reflect one another (and the viewer), whereby each glass object within the work simultaneously reflects and embodies its neighbour, creating a web of interrelation.

Adventure Samplers (2011 – 2012) investigates the nature of photography as a mnemonic memento based upon the collection of the photo album. The work questions the authenticity of the relationship between memory and portrait photography in light of the removal of the depicted individual's personal history.

The work consists of photographs of *carte de visite* photographs. *Carte de visite* photographs developed from calling cards as photography became an accessible medium in the late 1800s and they consisted of a small albumen print attached to a

thick card. What makes this type of photography unique is its design – using an internationally standard size, these cards were created to be exchanged globally through the mail and there was even a collecting craze in the Victorian era called ‘cardomania’ based upon these photographs, which depicted famous people and loved ones alike.

The images in this work consist of anonymous male figures coupled with embroidery that represent women’s needlework samplers. Stitching is an important methodology within my practice as it represents a personal act of transcription and possession in so far as to stitch is to map the surface with a metaphorical perambulation in miniature mirroring the external perambulation of the figures within the photographs.

Furthermore, stitching literally becomes a *punctum* where the stitch pierces the photograph and traces the individual resonance and response to the work. The type of stitches used and the manner in which they are applied demonstrates this image-led response. However this initial response to an image is not static as the photographs are reused within the work and each time the stitching changes. This questions the ability for the work to dictate the way in which it should be approached. Instead it becomes a mirror not only for the personal associations of the artist but also the viewer, as the work requires interpretation in both its construction and reception.

Stitching in the form of a needlework sampler, which was taught as a skill for young women to have, performs a dual and contradictory function as it serves a useful purpose and yet it is also purely decoration. It is a practical skill with seemingly no function. What it does speak to is the need and desire to make something beautiful, but more importantly, personal.

The work investigates the play between the anonymity of the figures within the photographs and the photograph’s function as a personal memento. In this way the photographs (mnemonic and metonymic souvenir) function as American literary theorist Susan Stewart’s incomplete souvenir, requiring a history and narrative to complete them. However each photograph is unable to express its original narrative due to the anonymity of the personal history it represents. As a result this work uses the photographs’ imagery as a prompt to construct a narrative of association that

questions the authenticity of original memory and experience and the way this translates, or more appropriately mistranslates, to the artist/viewer.

A brief compendium on the poetics of collecting (2012) is concerned with the personalisation of public collections as a reflection of the selection process by which the external world is rendered internalised.

The work consists of five books that speak to very idiosyncratic responses to collecting – *Forget me not: photography and remembrance* (2004) by Geoffrey Batchen, *The strange life of objects: 35 centuries of art collecting and collectors* (1961) by Maurice Rheims, *To have and to hold: an intimate history of collectors and collecting* (2002) by Philipp Blom, *On longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection* (1993) by Susan Stewart, and *The voices of silence* (1978) by André Malraux.

The titles of these works construct a form of concrete poetry that when viewed together as a collection, speak to a personal relationship with objects and collections. However, unlike a traditional collection where the collector owns and possesses items, this collection is created from withdrawn library books.

The term ‘withdrawn’ is used to demarcate a book that has been borrowed and also one that has been de-accessioned from a library’s collection. In this way the work examines both the nature of a public institution’s collection as being a space of preservation and the ideas surrounding personal possession and ownership.

This work asks the question, is it possible for a collection to be a collection if the items are only selected and temporarily possessed rather than owned by an individual?

Some notable figures in the personalised history of the collected world (2012) continues the concept of rendering the public private by investigating how the individualised act of transcription and collation of the names of historical figures creates new and idiosyncratic connections between their historical personas and the personal reason for their collection within this list.

The work addresses the aesthetic form of the written names of historical collectors, rendering the text as collectable object. This aesthetic quality is highlighted by the non-hierarchical presentation of the names, which disregards normal classifying criteria such as time period, nationality, and type of collection. However, each collector was chosen for his or her idiosyncratic and passionate approach to collecting (representing both connoisseurs and dilettantes alike) and the unique contribution these collections have had on a collective understanding on the significance of objects.

What this list also reflects is a highly personalised relationship between these historical figures and myself. Each one of the collectors named has informed my own approach and understanding of the potential of collecting as a methodology to construct not only a satisfactory private universe but also how this private vision of the world is shared with others.

Perfect Pets (2012) examines the concept of uniqueness, possession and value in relation to mass-produced kitsch objects that fulfil a purely decorative function. The work looks at how something mass-produced can become unique through personalisation. While this does not necessarily add economic value to the item it does create intrinsic value by rendering the objects as 'loved'.

The artwork consists of decorative, ceramic animal figurines that are specifically lifelike, which are then altered by simple craft materials such as felt, pom poms, fake flowers and ribbons. Both the figurines and the craft materials used to decorate them embody kitsch aesthetic. This is further heightened by the decorative treatment of the objects (e.g. crowns, corsages, necklaces).

Predominantly depicting domestic animals such as cats and dogs, these figurines were made as collectables rather than as functional objects. As a result they represent objects that are designed to appeal to an individual's need to construct an identity through the materialisation of personal taste.

This work references French theorist Jean Baudrillard's statement that the collected object is the finest of domestic animals, as it embodies a subject/object relationship that positions the collector as the master who receives the unconditional and non-confrontational love of the pet. While this work is decidedly less sinister in its intent, it does examine the absurdity of such collectables by amplifying their decorative function by being re-decorated.

The figurines' mimicry of nature can be understood as a way of aestheticising and taming the natural world (which in and of itself the collection already seeks to order and control) by the miniaturisation and representation of animals as ceramic collectables. These objects are further aestheticised by 'dressing' them up like childhood toys.

While the treatment of these objects can be seen as a traditionally gendered activity, the work investigates acts of play and possession. Moreover the work represents the superfluous and passionate nature of collecting described by psychoanalysis taken to the absurd conclusion of decorating the decoration.

Scarabattole (2012) addresses ideas about environment, experience and travel and their relationship to souvenirs that range from handmade objects, natural specimens and tourist items such as postcards, snow globes and miniatures of significant monuments. These are coupled with my own methodology of collecting small fragments of things found while travelling (both in daily movements and abroad).

Constructed as a cabinet of curiosities that references traditional images of *Wunderkammer* such as Italian artist Domenico Remps's painting, *A Cabinet of Curiosity* (c.1690) pictured in Chapter 1 of the written research), *Scarabattole* (2012) speaks to the historical accumulation of singularities as a personal form of souvenir gathering (in addition to the *Wunderkammer*'s other functions such as a microcosm of the material world and a symbol of the collector's wealth).

In Italian *scarabattolo* is a glass fronted display case and *scarabattola* (pl. -ole) is a trinket. In this way the title of the artwork describes both the case and the objects collected. A lack of distinction between the terms suggests that the items in these

cabinets (even the natural specimens) were designed to exist within this site as conversely the cabinet was designed to house such items.

Like *A brief compendium on the poetics of collecting* (2012), this work is a collection of things rather than a collection of altered objects. What this work displays is the act of creation through curation as artistic trace as opposed to the material trace in *Perfect Pets* (2012) or *Adventure Samplers* (2011 – 2012). As a result the purpose of such a collection is to trace a personalised selection of artefacts that memorialise the temporal relationship between the individual and the natural and social landscape and present them in a singular site for recollection.

As my own personal souvenir collection, the objects include mementos of places I wanted to travel to, things I wanted to discover, objects I wanted to experience and places I have been that no longer exist.

Outcomes of the Studio Research

The overall aim of the artwork exhibited in *Relics of All Things Precious* is to engage with the field discussed in the dissertation and contribute a unique visual perspective on the nature of personal collections. The intent of the exhibition is to foster a dialogue between aspects of collecting and demonstrate a conceptual and formal investigation into the relationships between the artist/collector and collected objects and images through a methodology that creates a critical engagement with the world.

Within this exhibition collecting can be viewed as an artistic strategy and process for making sense of the world through the repositioning of found and collected objects. This is important as it displays an approach that engages with an alternative critique of collecting that differs from historical investigations by artists into institutional and archival systems. The work does so by utilising conceptual and intuitive aspects of the *Wunderkammer* model in order to navigate the physical, conscious and unconscious world and engage with aspects of curiosity, chance, wandering and discovery.

The outcome of the studio component of *Relics of All Things Precious* demonstrates that collecting is an artistic strategy that makes intuitive, marginal, subjective, forgotten, banal, and irrational experiences and events, significant by engaging with the historical structures of traditional collections while also utilising alternative collecting methods. As a result the artworks in the exhibition represent a synthesis between collective and individual histories, sensible intuition and scientific inquiry, memory and amnesia, fact and fiction, and the material and immaterial. It is through this methodology that the work is used to construct a personal interpretation of the world by creating new work from visual, conceptual, physical and emotional fragments, making these collections different from more traditional and historical collecting models.